

# Three Buckets of Naval Aviation

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by Cdr. Steve Baxter

**M**any years ago, as a flight student, I was fortunate to have more than my share of good instructors. They would offer advice, encouragement and when needed, a healthy dose of motivation. Each had his own style. Some used soft-spoken, clever phrases. Others favored vein-popping, ICS-distorting tirades.

One teacher took a moment out of his busy day to explain his three-bucket theory to me. This old guy (he must have been nearly 30) obviously had been to those faraway places where few men boldly go, and fewer still return from.

He held my undivided attention when he mentioned the three buckets of naval aviation

Photo by PHAN James K. McNeil  
Modified by Allan Amen

during a debrief one day. After all, my pink sheet was sitting within reach of the black-and-silver Skilcraft resting in his gnarled paw.

“Let me tell ya about these buckets,” he said, saltiness and JP-5 dripping from every word.

“Yes sir,” I squeaked.

“These buckets are standard issue once ya get to your first fleet squadron. You carry them with you every day for the rest of your career.” His eyes reflected the pain of 11 months on Yankee Station, so I knew he spoke the truth. I had no idea what he was talking about (my mind still raced from shooting sloppy point-to-points an hour earlier).

“The first one,” he said, “is called the experience bucket. That one, when ya first get it issued, is empty. Nothing in it. Not a drop.” I figured that made sense. I knew I had a long way to go from my radial interceptor to a fleet airplane, whatever that was going to be.

He continued, “The experience bucket begins to fill from the moment you walk into your first ready room, whether you know it or not. Every time you go to work, it gets a bit fuller.” I was beginning to understand. He took a sip from a stained coffee mug and a long drag on an unfiltered cigarette. “As it fills, whatever is in there is available to use when you might need it, later on.”

I asked what he meant by that. “You see, while waiting in marshall on some dark and scary night in the IO, you’ll need that pail. You’ll reach into it, and the knot in the pit of your stomach will get a lot smaller, trust me.” He mentioned something about a slider at that point, but I figured it was some term from the olden days.

“The second bucket is labeled knowledge. Just like the first one, this one is empty when it’s issued.”

“How do I fill this one up?” I asked, in my whiney, ensign voice. I didn’t like the answer.

“This one is not like the first. This one you can only fill by hard work and study,” he replied. I was disappointed because I thought I was done studying once I got those Wings of Gold. He talked

about stuff like NATOPS and 4790, and a bunch of other pubs that I pretended to know. I just figured I’d put the names in my experience bucket and pull ‘em out to impress some other new guy.

“That knowledge bucket,” he went on, “will really come in handy. Scary thing about that one though.”

“Jimminy,” I thought, “if he says it’s scary, what’s next?”

The lieutenant continued. “With the knowledge bucket, if you don’t keep it refreshed by study, it begins to dry up. It’ll go completely empty if you don’t work at keeping it full. When you need to reach into it and it’s empty, you’ll be in a hurt locker.” I didn’t know what a hurt locker was, but I was pretty sure I didn’t want to be there. I made it a point to begin filling up my knowledge bucket ASAP (I had learned that acronym earlier that day).

He continued, “The third bucket is labeled luck. This one, unlike the other two, is filled to the brim on the very first day you get it.” Interesting, I thought. “The luck bucket is the one you *don’t* want to reach into very often. Unlike the others, once you take something out of the luck bucket, it’s gone. Can’t put it back. It’s much better to reach into one of the other two and leave this third one for those times when you *really* need it.” Sounded like good advice. “I’ve had to reach into that last one a couple of times,” he said. His eyes kind of glazed over, and I could have sworn I heard the razor-sharp growl of a missile-tracking radar. “Anyway,” he returned from that faraway place, “you don’t want to reach into that luck bucket when the other two are sitting there right next to it.”

I left the debrief without a pink-sheet that day, but I figured the two “belows” I got for those tortured point-to-points were worth it. Sure, I had learned a thing or two about radial-magnetic indicators and that the tail rises (or does it fall?), but I was more intrigued by the three-bucket theory. For just a little while, until my next flight, I felt as if I was slightly ahead of the power curve (I had learned that term earlier, too).

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